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ABSTRACT

The current Australian scene is a good example of how American culture as portrayed in the mass media is reflected by a receptor national culture. Australia, sharing a similar history and a common language with the United States, has virtually no resistance to American culture. Some differences in national characteristics, such as the Australian sense of collaboration as opposed to competition and their admiration of losers and of "bludgers" (people who get away with doing little work), have only slowed down the Americanization process. Also, the opposition to American cultural incursion prevalent among the communication scholars of Australia has only minimally lessened the forces of change. Instead, the American ethos has attracted many Australian artists, movie directors, actors, and writers. Especially important to the media scene is the successful entrepreneur and global press magnate, Rupert Murdoch, who is the consummate reflection of American-received culture. Murdoch was born Australian, but he is now a naturalized American. His influence in Australian politics and on the Australian society in its move toward Americanization is considerable. (Twenty-two notes are included.) (KEH)

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Case Study: Australia

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ABSTRACT

Projection and Reflection of American Culture Via Mass Media. Case Study: Australia

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This study assumes that capitalism, individualism and optimism are propagated by American culture as portrayed by the media. Taking as an example the resemblance between the Statue of Liberty and the "Goddess of Democracy" erected in Tienanmen Square in Beijing in June 1989, the image of which was propagated worldwide by satellite television, the paper focusses on American culture as reflected by receptor national cultures, and explores some implications of this reflection.

A case study of the current Australian scene with regard to the reception of American culture is attempted. Australia is described as a prototypical receptacle for American mass media, the popularity of the products of which is unassailable. A detailed documentation of the resistance to the incursions of American mores by Australian intellectuals is provided. Identification of Australian tendencies to "cut down tall poppies" (disrespect achievers), and to develop a cult of the loser in their indigenous films and television is provided as cultural examples foreign to the American style.

The career of the former Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch is taken as an example of American media culture reflected back to America.

His intervention on the Australian political scene is considered, and the case is made, that to Australian eyes, Rupert Murdoch today has become American mass media culture personified.

PROJECTION AND REFLECTION OF AMERICAN CULTURE ABROAD VIA MASS MEDIA.

CASE STUDY: AUSTRALIA

Projected and Reflected: Tiananmen Square

The most salient American image of 1989 spread worldwide came arguably from Tiananmen square. The papier mâché "Goddess of Democracy" straddled barriers of language and culture when shown on worldwide television. Apparently this structure was a spontaneous contribution by Beijing arts students. On television, however, it was interpreted by the mass audience as a replica of the Statue of Liberty, an iconographic message more ideologically American than Coca-Cola, jeans, jazz or even rock 'n roll. The "send me your poor" unspoken slogan provided a feminine, nurturing implication of a safe haven for aspiring boat people. This subtext does not jibe with a strident call to the class struggle in which the united workers should be about losing their chains, which is, of course, the dominant image which ideologically all communist states must project. A clear challenge to the Chinese communist leadership was made, and it was met.

To the student of communication the "American" image emanating from Beijing is an interesting and important artifact. To American communication scholars, and indeed to all Americans, it is evidence of a message received, interpreted and sent

forward. It is a truism of the trade that you can measure the effectiveness of your communication effort by monitoring the communications of your target audience to see if they are saying what you told them. Every parent and teacher has felt the pleasure of satisfaction when children or students have presented an idea as their own, when it is one which the parent or teacher has tried to get across, perhaps with blatant repetition. Success in communication can only be claimed when the person who receives the message acknowledges receipt of the message by passing it on, because by definition a message self-destructs at its terminus. That is, in essence, the "message" no longer exists unless it is sent forward. Apparently, then, American propagandists have cause for satisfaction that an ideological point had been scored. While the particular lamp from Tiananmen Square seems to have been extinguished, at least for the moment, it had to be extinguished by force. In the realm of ideas, force doesn't count.

Perhaps the American message is derivative, a projection of an unfulfilled European dream given freely from Europe just as the Statue of Liberty was a gift from France over a hundred years ago. Time has made that derivation from Reformation, Enlightenment, and Industrial Revolution irrelevant today, as it is now as American as the automobile is Japanese. What is distinctively American is the cult of the rights of the individual against those of the state, begun over two hundred

years ago when the residents of the thirteen colonies stopped being British subjects and became American citizens.

The relentless optimism for the individual which is so much a feature of the American Dream is not merely a temperamental, sentimental nor even a metaphysical position; it is political one. Nor is it less powerful politically for its denial of any political motivation, for a denial of any political motivation is essentially a political stance.

A Receptor Nation: Australia

If in ideological terms the United States is the prototypical source of messages for the world, as the Nordenstreng thesis of a one-way flow of communication would have it,[1] Australia is the prototypical receptor. While the French, Russians, Japanese or even the Norwegians have a national language to protect them against the inroads of Hollywood, Australia has virtually no resistance to American culture. A former British colony which has become a multicultural nation of immigrants, Australia has a history shared with the U.S. in so many respects, it is difficult to find national characteristics which exist in Australians and not in Americans. These differences do exist, however, and can be identified, especially when highlighted in contrast to reflected American values and culture.

The differences are very important to the student of communication as they not only point up the limitations of the transportation model of communication (Sender, Channel, Message, Receiver and Feedback and so forth) but also point out the usefulness of cultural models which borrow freely from anthropology, history, literature, media studies, psychology, sociology and political science.

When George Washington prevented the British from dumping convicts in North America, a practice they had indulged for over a hundred years, he fathered a country. King George despatched a fleet of criminals to the antipodes and modern Australia was born in 1788. Whether or not it is the inheritance of the gulag past, there are specifically Australian traits which can be readily seen in a content analysis of Australian literature, films or newspapers. They include the well-known (in Australia) national trait for "cutting down tall poppies", a phrase which means a desire to see the excellent or even the competent humbled. There is a thesis that in Australia there is an "absolute hostility to excellence".[2] A definite national masochistic cult of the loser also exists. To American eyes all this is simple perversity. It is so foreign to the American zeitgeist it is inexplicable and unexpected from a nation which is "so like us".

The evidence for the existence of the "cutting down tall poppies" syndrome can be found in the popular press almost on a daily basis. For example, in searching the daily national newspaper on the day of writing, the writer found a comment to this effect pertaining to the Australian painter Sidney Nolan.[3] The article covered the criticism Nolan received from the Australian art establishment and commented that "the rancor did not stifle his international reputation and Nolan understood the need to kick poppies off perches". While the idiom is used in a variant form, the concept is the same.

As another example, when Vice President Dan Quayle visited Australia in 1989 he had been briefed about this facet of the Australian character. In a jocular comment to the National Press Club, he referred to himself as a "tall poppy",[4] which an Australian politician would never do. The Australian media were as bemused by this revelation as they were two decades previously when then Vice-President Spiro Agnew arrived wearing an emerald green suit. However, while with Agnew the costume made such a story that Australian reaction was, in turn, reported on American network news,[5] Quayle's comment was accepted as an observation from another culture by a man struggling with an unfamiliar idiom. An informal survey of reports and commentaries of the time seem to indicate that the Australian media did not consider him to be a "tall poppy", perhaps explaining why he was left relatively unscathed.

By doing a content analysis of Australian films, one can see there is also a national characteristic which amounts to a cult of the loser.[6] Perhaps this is natural for Australians for the Australian national day, Anzac Day (April 25), celebrates a defeat of Australian forces who attacked the Turks in 1915. This national holiday has a solemn ritual to memorialize the fallen soldiers and is very unlike the American Fourth of July.[7]

In his book, National Fictions, Graeme Turner quotes Bob Ellis, a well known Australian filmaker and critic, who uses his sardonic wit to make a point. Ellis refers to a wide selection of Australian films: romances, comedies, tragedies, children's films, war films and historical stories. These movies deal with subjects as varied as the human suffering in racial exploitation to the joy of horse racing. Some of these films such as Breaker Morant, My Brilliant Career and Newsfront received a good critical reception in the United States. The producers, however, behaved as if the Hollywood happy ending was to be consciously avoided and all follow the dictates of the cult of the loser. Ellis lists the variety of fates of the protagonists of Australia's national cinema:

> ... they are only part of a larger national perception, so apparent in our cinema, of the pointlessness of every effort, since nothing ever changes and you end at your beginning. Aunt Edna

> recaptures Bazza, Judy Davis rejects Sam Neill ... Don's party doesn't win the election. Petersen fails the exam. Breaker is taken away and shot. Jimmie Blacksmith is taken out and hanged. Ned Kelly is taken out and hanged. Mad Dog Morgan is shot, decapitated, and his scrotum given to Frank Thring. Phar Lap is taken out and stuffed. Richard Moir gives up looking for Anna. Jack Thompson in Sunday ends up broke and lonely as he began. The Man of Flowers ends up rich and lonely as he began ... Mr Perceval the pelican is shot... Bill Hunter, in Newsfront, grim and principled as ever, loses his wife and mistress but keeps his limp.[8]

Indigenous Media Expression

Whether or not they project a national perception of the pointlessness of every effort, and the inevitability of death, Australian television series have gained large audiences in Australia and, indeed, have been successful worldwide. They have even been seen as exemplars in the effort to protect "cultural product". When the French Ministry of Culture issued its report International Image Markets by Armand Mattleart et.al. in 1984, the Australian series were specifically noted as having "easily beaten Dallas and Dynasty when they were in direct competition".[9]

It has been proposed that producers of national films and television programs should study their mythology and exploit it to capture their national audience.[10] No program exploits Australian mythology more than the nation's most successful television program "A Country Practice". It is instructive and appropriate to quote Jim Davern, the creator and executive producer of the program, when he contrasts his philosophy of program content with the American product:

> Americans tune into Dallas and Dynasty because the American subconscious says, "one day you are going to be rich, you're going to make it and have a limo and a Lear jet". Until recently that hasn't been the Australian way. The Australian subconscious says, "One of these days you are going to go out there among the gum trees and have fifty acres of your own and grow your own vegetables and milk the cow and you're not going to call anyone your master".[11]

The perceptions expressed here are the pertinent issue. Whether or not Dynasty or Dallas exemplify American programming, or are misperceived when take out of their media-rich national context, or even exemplify a long-faded fad, the genre seems to be salient and was quoted so many times in the Mattleart report it achieved the status of a recurring theme.

Mr Davern's views are in the majority among media critics in Australia. The conventional wisdom can be summed up by Bob Ellis as recorded in the book American Dreams Australian Movies. Asked whether Australia could avoid being either Americanised from inside or colonized from the outside, Ellis replied that Australia could if budgets remained modest. He added, "But greed is all-consuming, and as the prices go relentlessly up, there is a point at which we must, in self-defense, become American. I hope that some government tyranny of the left gets in and prevents it".[12]

Ellis (for the record) is not an American fan. "Americans are quite correctly detested here. They have only two talents - hotel management and self congratulation. ... They look good for a while, but they choke everything that tries to grow under them. They are a cancer. They are a wicked, awful people".[13]

The later success of the two Crocodile Dundee movies, which many Australian critics saw as "American" movies made for American tastes, would have fulfilled Ellis' worst fears.

A more scholarly case for this point of view is put by Sam Rhodie writing in Communications and the Media in Australia.

> The story of the Australian film industry is brief and depressing. The name itself is a fiction, a

misnomer. Distribution and exhibition is almost wholly foreign, American multinational-owned and controlled. Most of the films screened in Australia are American. The few Australian films which began to appear from the early 1970s are economically marginal even in Australia. Most have been unprofitable. Nearly all have been subsidised by public money, either directly or by tax concessions. The reasons for subsidy have fluctuated between fears for the national identity and hopes for a private prosperity, but the chief beneficiaries have been overseas companies. The films have been undistinguished: conventional, conformist, familiar, however placed in the exotic setting of Australia.[14]

Resistance from the Intellectuals

When one applies the principle of reflexive analysis to the Australian scene, considering the market for American products and mass culture, the "American way of life" seems to be favoured and sought.[15] However, amongst the communication scholars of Australia, judging from their writings, the opposition to American cultural incursion is marked.[16] Perhaps even more than American scholars themselves, the Australian media scholars seem critical of American culture, politics and commercial ethos.

Writing in Communications and the Media in Australia, Ted Wheelwright, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Sydney, quoted Karl Marx: "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future".[17]

Wheelwright goes on to note that:

> He could not have known that we would be able to see this image every night in our homes, in our cinemas, read about it every morning in our syndicated newspapers, and absorb its values from some of our educational institutions. The effects of the commercialisation and politicalisation of culture on this global scale have yet to be assessed.

Wheelwright, following Mattleart, also makes the point that "as the cultural and information sectors grow in economic importance, the role of the state in this area declines, as its ideological functions are transferred to the marketplace".[18]

Resistance to American Culture

The academic case for resistance to American culture is not confined to criticism of American mass media, but to all the apparatus that accompanies the "American way of life",

especially in government and commerce. In a piece entitled, "The Ideological Management Industry", a psychologist at the University of New South Wales, Alex Carey, made a detailed case that American professional corporate persuaders were undermining Australian democracy. By bringing to Australia American techniques of political control, they supplied an all-pervasive propaganda for the benefits of the free market and business sponsored policy research.[19]

Carey listed such change agents in the socio-industrial field as the Committee for Economic Development, the Business Roundtable, the Business Council and the Foundation for Economic Education which all delivered a message for increased efficiency and competitiveness, private enterprise and free market economics.

While the 1986 Australian census figures show a sharp decline in union membership, the level of unionism in Australia is twice that pertaining in the United States. Besides national characteristics such as the cult of the loser and "cutting down tall poppies" already described, anthropologists such as George Renwick tell us that, compared with North Americans, Australians are more collaborative, less competitive and have a better sense of community. Renwick claims that Australians even admire "bludgers", people who get away with doing little work, a cultural trait which the Business Roundtable will surely want to change.[20]

Wheelwright, in including Carey's work in his anthology, is surely correct in seeing the mass media as existing in a context of socio-industrial change. Clearly, he appreciates the idea of a kind of international solidarity in the audiovisual area, perhaps by governmental action, in sympathy with the sentiments expressed in the Mattleart report.

Meanwhile, "restructuring and privatisation", "freeing up the workforce", and "becoming internationally competitive by exporting" are the current slogans emanating from both government and opposition in Australia.

In the book American Dreams Australian Movies there is a quotation attributes to the German film maker Wim Wenders about American culture: "They have colonized our subconscious ..."[21] It seems self evident that the American ethos has attracted many Australian artists, movie directors, actors and writers, but none so important to the media scene as the spectacularly successful entrepreneur Rupert Murdoch. His journey from Australia to America bears investigation.

Murdoch: The Media Marketplace Personified

The role of Rupert Murdoch the Australian-born press magnate as a representative of the marketplace personified and as a reflection of American received culture is an interesting one. It is widely accepted in Australia that his considerable

support for the Whitlam Labor Government (1972 - 1975) initially helped it to power and his change of allegiance later helped depose it. In doing this, he had followed the interventionist political tradition of Australian newspaper proprietors.

Mr Murdoch became an American citizen in mid-1986 in order to comply with the FCC requirement that broadcast licensees be American citizens. Despite his new allegiance, Mr Murdoch's interest in Australian politics, however, apparently remained quite high, and as media proprietor, his influence remained considerable. In October 1989, his comments created news when he criticised the Opposition leadership in a broadcast which attracted nationwide media attention. The leader of the opposition in counter-attack pointed out that Mr Murdoch didn't have a vote, his editors were independent and should exercise the high standards of professionalism Australians expected from their newspapers.

To the <u>cognoscenti</u> the ironies were delectable especially in the context of the day. The Labor Government's current precedent-setting industrial crisis was occasioned by an airline pilots' strike. The Government, following Reagan's 1982 action against the air traffic controllers and Thatcherite tactics, immediately sought dissolution of the union within 24 hours, brought in military aircraft to move civil traffic, paid subsidies to the airlines, changed immigration and other rules to allow strike-breaking foreign

pilots into the country, and encouraged the airlines in civil suits against the individual pilots who resigned their positions. Following opinion polls which showed that most Australians saw pilots as a well-paid élite, and that most did not fly, and relying on the well-known penchant of Australians to be envious of achievers (the aforementioned "cutting down the tall poppies" syndrome), the confident Labor Prime Minister sneered at the pilots as "glorified bus drivers". While one might wonder why the Labor head of government should disparage the role of the bus driver part of his working-class constituency, it takes little discernment why Mr Murdoch should favor the Government over the Opposition. Rupert Murdoch owned half of Ansett Airlines, Australia's largest commercial airline.

Murdoch, in trading in his Australian citizenship for American, exemplified the psychological attraction which America offers his type of personality. Glenda Korporaal, an astute Murdoch watcher, suggests there is an inevitability to Rupert Murdoch's adoption of American citizenship, as he appears to be the consummate media capitalist. She has written:

> Despite his Australian origins and the big financial contribution of his British operations, it was America - the home of capitalism itself - where Murdoch was feeling more and more at home. He had taken out American residency in the mid-1970's and

> brought an apartment in New York on Fifth Avenue, overlooking Central Park. He was fascinated with the country and its respect for success and bold, aggressive entrepreneurs. As the News Corporation expanded around the world, it became clear that only in America could be really hope to satisfy the persistent need for new challenges.[22]

From an Australian perspective, Mr Murdoch has found his ideological home. He epitomized the ethos of American commercial media. He is American media culture personified.

The pace of the "Americanisation" of Australia will undoubtedly quicken in the foreseeable future. There will be, however, sufficient indigenous resistance to change for some differences to exist. For American scholars, meanwhile, it may be instructive to study the American media scene as personified by the former Australian, and current American media proprietor, Rupert Murdoch. From the Australian perspective, his is the face representing all that American media stand for, a view which may give American media scholars food for thought.

While it was a revelation to many in the mass television audience in June 1989 to see a papier mâché Statue of Liberty look-alike being constructed in the heart of Beijing, the image of American media manners, morals and methods reflected from Australia is no cardboard cut-out. In the dynamic

presence of Mr Rupert Murdoch, the reflection from Australia is not only a portent for the future but for the very practical present.

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